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The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God Above Party?

CARSTEN T. VALA

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Carsten T. Vala's monograph-length account of Protestant church-state interactions is ambitious in its scope. Vala's study seeks to go beyond recent local-level studies of Protestant-state relations through "investigating congregations across the country, by conceptualising the official agenda for Protestants in terms of culture and nationalism, and by relating the values and beliefs of Protestants to the regime attempt to shape the public transcript" (p. 86). He attempts to do so by focusing on "the grassroots efforts and ordinary, everyday struggles of Protestant members and leaders of churches in a rapidly changing society" (p. 17). The monograph revolves around three main questions: the first seeks to interrogate the role of the Protestant state-sanctioned religious associations (TSPM/CCC) and the congregations registered with the state through them; the second asks how illegal Protestant groups manage to grow, despite restrictions; and the third area enquires as to what leads the state to suppress some illegal groups, while not suppressing others. Vala seeks to further the discussion on the limitations of approaches to church-state relations in the PRC which focus on state repression and the resistance of religious groups through an analytical framework which takes into account the dominance of the state as well as the opportunities for negotiating with it. Vala also employs James C. Scott's concept of a "public transcript" outlined in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990) in order to help determine the outcomes of church and state interactions by analysing the distance between the official agenda and the public transcript (p. 11). While this reviewer applauds an attempt to further the discussion on contemporary church-state interactions via a framework which better answers to the empirical evidence, he feels that there are some shortcomings in the analysis which weaken its overall impact.

Vala's study draws on his own fieldwork carried out between 2002 and 2014 in large cities such as Harbin, Beijing, Wuhan, Shanghai, Changsha, Nanjing, and Dalian. He conducted more than 80 interviews with TSPM/CCC leaders, clergy and lay believers as well as "participant observation of official churches in several cities" (p. 16). His study also draws on religious policy documents, cadre training handbooks, publications on religious affairs work, and other official materials.

Following an Introduction which outlines the scope of the study, including a brief section on methods, Chapter 2 provides an overview of church-state interactions from 1949 to the present and Vala argues here that poor implementation of religious policy in the early Reform Era due to weak state capacity, provided an environment in which the number of illegal Protestant groups was able to grow. Chapter 3 investigates the attempts of state-sanctioned Protestant TSPM/CCC leaders to push a public transcript of CCP dominance over society. The chapter argues that the state does not always control these associations effectively which provides space for negotiation between Protestants and the regime which can benefit Protestants. Chapter 4 briefly analyses the Theological Construction Movement and argues that the TSPM/CCC has failed in its attempts to shape views in congregations registered under them. This chapter further argues that the state has not been successful in making a clear distinction between registered and unregistered congregations. Chapter 5 deals with how unregistered congregations grow and Vala argues that social capital is at the centre of their development. Chapter 6 explores how large, public urban Protestant congregations have

been formed since the late 2000s and argues that these congregations in particular have altered the public transcript to an extent but that there exist clear limits to how active these congregations can be in the public arena. Chapters 7 and 8 are more detailed case studies of two different unregistered urban churches which the state sought to repress in the early 2010s: Shanghai All Nations Missionary Church and Beijing Shouwang Church. While the Shanghai church largely collapsed when the state placed it under extreme pressure, the Beijing church did not. Vala argues that the differing outcomes for the two churches were largely based on differences in leadership capacity, institutionalised structures within the churches and the local socio-political context. The concluding chapter presents several possible scenarios for the future of Protestant church-state interactions in the PRC.

While this monograph provides an up-dated and coherent account of Protestantism's relationship to the PRC state, there are a number of weaknesses with the analysis. The fieldwork focus on large cities (which are mostly, if not all, provincial capitals) ignores the possibility of a range of factors which could affect all manner of church-state interactions in smaller cities and rural areas, not least of which is the access to resources for training cadres and other officials. The large cities which Vala refers to in his study do not include those in poorer provinces (or those with higher populations of ethnic minorities) and economic pressures on churches and local state agencies arguably also impact church-state relations. Secondly, the study ignores regulations on religious affairs except the national regulations which first came into effect in 2005. Provincial and municipal-level regulations on religious affairs generally tend to be more restrictive than the national regulations, and this is a significant area which is overlooked, even in the case studies.

Thirdly, the reviewer feels that the manner in which evidence is presented is, at times problematic and reveals perhaps a lack of critical engagement with viewpoints and information presented in interviews. For example, Vala says that RAB cadres "generally occupy the second or third leadership positions (often as secretary, or *mishuzhang*) within religious associations like the TSPM and CCC, where their organisational status does not attract attention from lay Protestants" (p. 44). This is a significant claim which requires further elaboration. Further, the idea that "Many RAB cadres, especially at lower levels of the Party-state, are recruited from the ranks of demobilised soldiers and have little schooling to help them grasp complex policies" (p. 42) may have been more accurate in the early 2000s but is less accurate now. Citing a single interview as the source for such claims is problematic and a more thorough analysis of the issues is required. Lastly, in Chapter 4, Vala uses the Theological Construction Movement (TCM) promoted by Ding Guangxun as a case study to demonstrate that this "most aggressive attempt to promote the official agenda as the public transcript among Protestants" was a failure. While the reviewer agrees that the TCM was largely resisted or ignored by "official" congregations, Vala's understanding of what the TCM was trying to achieve appears to be largely based on second-hand accounts and the analysis does not consider what Ding may have been trying to achieve through his writings and the launch of this theological campaign. These areas of weakness lessen the overall force of this ambitious analysis.

However, despite these criticisms, Vala's study adds to our understanding of how the PRC state approaches religious and other groups which seek to operate without receiving formal sponsorship from state-sanctioned organisations. This monograph will therefore be of interest to anyone working on religion in China – Christianity, in particular – and will also be of interest more generally to political scientists who specialise in authoritarian/semi-authoritarian regimes and their mechanisms for dealing with organisations outside official control.

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